DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 578 PS 022 492

AUTHOR	Wallach, Lorraine B.
TITLE	Violence and Young Children's Development. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-PS-94-7
PUB DATE	Jun 94
CONTRACT	RR97002007
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Development; Childhood Attitudes; Child Rearing; *Community Problems; Early Childhood Education; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Family Environment; Interpersonal Competence; Parent Child Relationship; *Preschool Children; Victims of Crime; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS	*Child Safety; ERIC Digests; *Resilience (Personality)

ABSTRACT

This digest examines the developmental consequences for children who are the victims of or witnesses to family and community violence. A baby's ability to trust depends upon the family's ability to provide consistent caregiving, which is compromised when the infant's family lives in a community racked by violence. When they reach toddlerhood, children need to practice skills such as jumping and climbing. However, children who live in violence-ridden communities are often confined to indoor quarters that hamper their activities. When they reach the preschool years, young children may not be able to venture outside the family because they are prevented from going out to play. During the school years, community and family violence takes a high toll on children's development. Children whose energies are drained through worry about violence have difficulty learning in school, and the cognitive functioning of children traumatized by violence can be compromised. Children who have been mistreated may have trouble getting along with others, and children whose only role models use physical force to solve problems may be unable to learn nonaggressive ways of social interaction. Children who live with violence may repress feelings, have difficulty seeing themselves in meaningful roles, feel helpless, and regress to an earlier stage of development. Children's ability to cope with violence is influenced by their temperament and by their parents' abilities to withstand the stresses of poverty and violence. School and day care staff can help children deal with the consequences of violence by offering them alternative perceptions of themselves and teaching them skills for getting along in the world. (BC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

University of Illinois • 805 W. Pennsylvania Ave. • Urbana, IL 61801-4897
(217) 333-1386 • (800) 583-4135 • ericeece@ux1.cso.uiuc.edu

ERIC DIGEST
June 1994 • EDO-PS-94-7

ED 369 578

Violence and Young Children's Development

Lorraine B. Wallach

Violence in the United States has claimed thousands of lives and annually costs hundreds of millions of dollars in medical care and lost wages. In the context of this digest, the term *violence* is used to refer to child abuse or other domestic conflict, gang aggression, and community crime, including assault. One of the most pernicious consequences of violence is its effect on the development of children. This digest examines the developmental consequences for children who are the victims of, or witnesses to, family and community violence.

Violence in the Preschool Years

Children growing up with violence are at risk for pathological development. According to Erikson's classical exposition of individual development, learning to trust is the infant's primary task during the first year of life. Trust provides the foundation for further development and forms the basis for self-confidence and self-esteem. The baby's ability to trust is dependent upon the family's ability to provide consistent care and to respond to the infant's need for love and stimulation. Caregiving is compromised when the infant's family lives in a community racked by violence and when the family fears for its safety. Parents may not give an infant proper care when their psychological energy is sapped by efforts to keep safe (Halpern, 1990). Routine tasks like going to work, shopping, and keeping clinic appointments take careful planning and extra effort.

When infants reach toddlerhood they have an inner push to try newly gained skills, such as walking, jumping, and climbing. These skills are best practiced in parks and playgrounds, not in crowded apartments. But young children who live in communities racked by crime and menaced by gangs are often not permitted to be out-of-doors. Instead, they are confined to small quarters that hamper their activities, and that lead to restrictions imposed by parents and older family members (Scheinfeld, 1983). These restrictions, which are difficult for toddlers to understand and to obey, can lead in turn to disruptions in their relationships with the rest of the family.

During the preschool years, young children are ready to venture outside of the family in order to make new relationships and learn about other people (Spock, 1988). However, when they live in neighborhoods where dangers lurk outside, children may be prevented from going out to play or even from accompanying older children on errands. In addition, preschoolers may be in child care programs that are located in areas where violent acts occur frequently.

Violence: The School Years

Although the early years are critical in setting the stage for future development, the experiences of the school years are also important to children's healthy growth. During the school years, children develop the social and academic skills necessary to function as adults and citizens; violence at home or in the community takes a high toll.

- When children's energies are drained because they are defending themselves against outside dangers or warding off their own fears, they have difficulty learning in school (Craig, 1992). Children traumatized by violence can have distorted memories, and their cognitive functions can be compromised (Terr, 1983).
- Children who have been victimized by or who have seen others victimized by violence may have trouble learning to get along with others. The anger that is often instilled in such children is likely to be incorporated into their personality structures. Carrying an extra load of anger makes it difficult for them to control their behavior and increases their risk for resorting to violent action.
- Children learn social skills by identifying with adults in their lives. Children cannot learn nonaggressive ways of interacting with others when their only models, including those in the media, use physical force to solve problems (Garbarino et al., 1992).
- To control their fears, children who live with violence may repress feelings. This defensive maneuver takes its toll in their immediate lives and can lead to further pathological development. It can interfere with their ability to relate to others in meaningful ways and to feel empathy. Individuals who cannot empathize with others' feelings are less likely to curb their own aggression, and more likely to become insensitive to brutality in general. Knowing how some youths become emotionally bankrupt in this way helps us understand why they are so careless with their own lives and with the lives of others (Gilligan, 1991).
- Children who are traumatized by violence may have difficulty seeing themselves in future roles that are

PS 022492

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

meaningful. The California school children who were kidnapped and held hostage in their bus were found to have limited views of their future lives and often anticipated disaster (Terr, 1983). Children who cannot see a decent future for themselves have a hard time concentrating on present tasks such as learning in school and becoming socialized.

- Children need to feel that they can direct some part of their existence, but children who live with violence learn that they have little say in what happens to them. Beginning with the restrictions on autonomy when they are toddlers, this sense of helplessness continues as they reach school age. Not only do they encounter the constraints that all children do, but their freedom is restricted by an environment in which gangs and drug dealers control the streets.
- When children experience a trauma, a common reaction is to regress to an earlier stage when things were easier. This regression can be therapeutic by allowing the child to postpone having to face the feelings aroused by the traumatic event. It is a way of gaining psychological strength. However, when children face continual stress they are in danger of remaining psychologically in an earlier stage of development.

Individual Differences and Resilience

Not all children respond to difficult situations in the same way; there are many factors that influence coping abilities, including age, family reaction to stress, and temperament. Younger children are more likely to succumb to stress than school-age children or adolescents. Infants can be shielded from outside forces if their caregivers are psychologically strong and available to the baby.

Children who live in stable, supportive homes have a better chance of coping because they are surrounded by nurturing adults. If grown-ups are willing to listen to children's fears and provide appropriate outlets for them, children are better able to contend with the difficulties in their lives. Children are more resilient if they are born with easy temperaments and are in good mental health. If they are lucky enough to have strong parents who can withstand the stresses of poverty and community violence, children also have a better chance of growing into happy and productive adults (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983).

Adaptability in Children

Although what happens to them in the early years is very important, many children can overcome the hurts and fears of earlier times. For children living in an atmosphere of stress and violence, the ability to make relationships and get from others what they miss in their own families and communities is crucial to healthy development.

The staff in schools, day care centers, and recreational programs can be resources to children and offer them alternative perceptions of themselves, as well as teaching them skills for getting along in the world. With time, effort, and skill, caregivers can provide children with an opportunity to challenge the odds and turn their lives in a positive direction.

NOTE: This digest is the first in a series of two digests on violence in children's lives.

References

Bell, C. (1991). Traumatic Stress and Children in Danger. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 2(1): 175-188.

Carnegie Corporation of New York. (1994). Saving Youth from Violence. *Carnegie Quarterly* 39(1, Winter): 2-5.

Craig, S.E. (1992). The Educational Needs of Children Living with Violence. *Phi Delta Kappan* 74(1, Sep 10): 67-71. EJ 449 879.

Garbarino, J., N. Dubrow, K. Kostelny, and C. Pardo. (1992). *Children in Danger: Coping with the Consequences of Community Violence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ED 346 217. Not available from EDRS.

Garmezy, N. and M. Rutter, Eds. (1983). *Stress, Coping, and Development in Children*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Gilligan, J. (1991). Shame and Humiliation: The Emotions of Individual and Collective Violence. Paper presented at the Erikson Lectures, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, May 23.

Halpern, R. (1990). Poverty and Early Childhood Parenting: Toward a Framework for Intervention. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 60(1, Jan): 6-18.

Kotlowitz, A. (1991). *There Are No Children Here*. New York: Doubleday.

Scheinfeld, D. (1983). Family Relationships and School Achievement among Boys in Lower-Income Urban Black Families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 53(1, Jan): 127-143.

Spock, B. (1988). *Dr. Spock on Parenting*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Terr, L. (1983). Chowchilla Revisited: The Effects of Psychic Trauma Four Years after a Schoolbus Kidnapping. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 140: 1543-1550.

Wallach, L. (1993). Helping Children Cope with Violence. *Young Children* 48(4, May): 4-11. EJ 462 996.

Zero To Three. (1992). *Can They Hope To Feel Safe Again?: The Impact of Community Violence on Infants, Toddlers, Their Parents and Practitioners*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Clinical Infant Programs. ED 352 161.

Zinsmeister, K. (1990). Growing Up Scared. *Atlantic Monthly* 256(6, Jun): 49-66.

References identified with an ED (ERIC document) or EJ (ERIC journal) number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 825 locations worldwide, and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses, such as: UMI (800) 732-0616; or ISI (800) 523-1850.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. DERR97002007. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.